"Here I am Still Going Strong." Hazel Henson

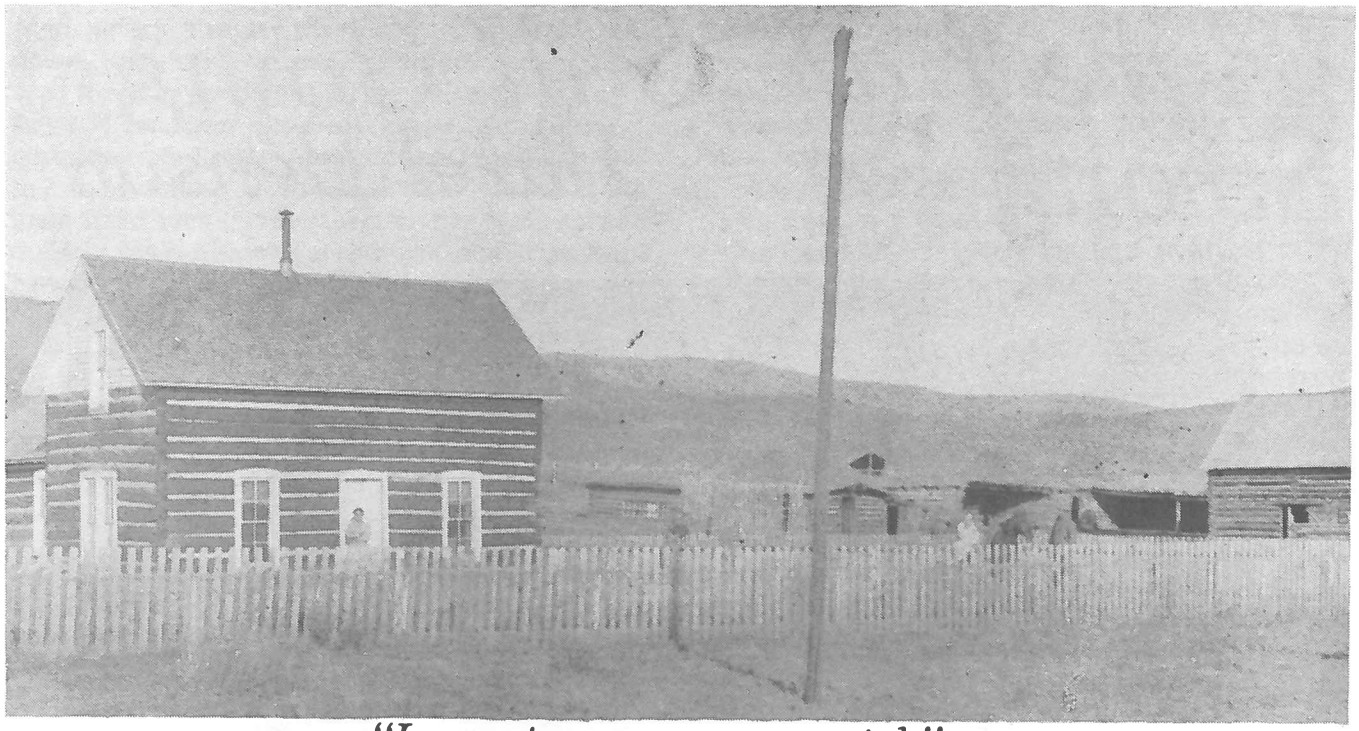
By: Cathy Colleen Klebba

Hazel is a woman who lived in many states yet has always considered Colorado her home. She is a lady with many stories to tell about her life and the lives of those around her. She was born February 7, 1899, and she started her story by telling us about her childhood.

"I was born on my father's homestead, about two miles from what is now Phippsburg. He called it Poverty Gulch after one of the best paying mines in Cripple Creek, Colorado, where he had participated in the gold rush before he came to Routt County, married my mother and settled down on the homestead. Before I was one year old they bought what was called the Alex Gray Place. It was an improved ranch and that is where Phippsburg is now. It was a working ranch and there was no town and no railroad. I lived there until I was about nine years old.

"My father was Lewis F. Wilson and my mother was May King. Her parents took up a homestead in Toponas. They came from New York. My mother and her brothers all grew up in Toponas. She was a teacher at Yampa and my father was a rancher.

"My father was a cattle man. He had his own beef and we always had a garden. But to get flour, sugar and things of that kind we went to Yampa to a store there called the Hernage Mercantile Company owned by an Englishman. We went up there to buy flour and sugar, which my mother bought in hundred pound sacks. Course, we had our own milk cow, milk and butter you had on a ranch. My father made some money in Cripple Creek gold rush. That's the way he got his start with a herd of cattle. We weren't rich or anything, but we were com-



"I was just a country girl."

fortable, never had any financial problems. Of course, as a child, I wouldn't know about that anyway, they didn't talk to me about their problems. I never had any worry about being poor.

"There was no town of Oak Creek when I was a child. There was a school they called Palace school house. I can remember one time we had a debate there with my father on one side and Henry Myers on the opposite side. I think my father's side won on that occassion. They asked me to sing, so I stood up in front of the crowd and in the school house. I sang "Yellow Rose of Texas." Everybody clapped and I guess that was the only time I was ever famous.

At that time skiing was not a sport as it is now, but then that's the way people got around. I remember seeing some skis by our back door one time, and I thought it would be fun to get on them and try. People made their own skis and that was a means of transportation. Around the country we had a little buggy on runners, a cutter, more like a buggy than a sleigh, and that's the way we went to church and all during the winter. We would just drive up there every Sunday. They had sleds too for heavier work. My father fed his cattle that way. We had a big pasture across the river. They called it Bear River in those days. Every day he would load up; it had a hay rack on it in the winter. He had to do that every morning so they used to sled that way."

Hazel laughed as she told me about her earliest memory. "My earliest memory is kind of fun. On the way to Chicago we stopped on the way to Missouri where my grandfather Wilson lived, my father's father. I had never seen him before, I was just a little girl, so he took me out and was going to show me the little pigs in the pig stye. We went out and I climbed up on the fence and was looking over at the little pigs and the old mother pig came running up and made a noise right in my face. That's the worst scare I had, that's the first memory that I have.

"My Uncle Riley, my father's oldest brother, had a daughter about my age and we used to play together. The old road went up over a hill between our two houses, and we would meet up at the top of that hill and would play together. We used to take the big leaves of the sunflowers and make hats; in those days, ladies wore lots of hats. It was an important thing for pins, so we would use little pieces of sagebrush for our pins. Our models were flat rocks. That was one way of entertainment. I can remember when my third brother was born my father took me to stay at my cousin's house for the day. So we were playing and my cousin said, 'I bet when you get home there will be a new baby there.' I asked, 'What makes you say that? We have lots of babies at my house.' She said, 'Did your mother braid her hair before you left?' And she did, she always braided her hair in two braids before she went to bed, and she said, 'When your mother braids her hair and you go and stay at somebody's house, when you get home there will be a baby there.' I didn't think she knew what she was talking about, but sure enough when I got home there was a new baby brother. But as far as entertainment we went to Sunday school and sometimes they had programs. Our school didn't have much entertainment 'cause there weren't too many students there, then we used to go to

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Steamboat and visit my grandpa and grandma.

Well, everything was horses and wagons and you went horseback most everywhere. Our family had what they called a spring wagon. There were seven of us children and every Sunday we would drive up to Yampa to church in the spring wagon. When I first started to school I rode two miles on horseback. I was six years old and went to a little log school house up above what is now Phippsburg. The building is no longer there, but it was a one-room log school house and there was only one other little girl and I who came regularly. There were other students but they didn't always come. I got a lot of extra attention and we learned how to spell.

"My friend's name was Irene Chuate. Her parents were also pioneers. We were the same age. I would go by her house on my horse and she would come out and get on behind me and go to school. Our teacher spent a lot of time with us. I remember I was kept after school one day till I learned how to spell Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and I was just a first grader then. They gave us a good foundation back in those days because they taught us the sounds of the letters and how to spell out a word. I know it wasn't very long till we were reading. We only had school in the summer, the three months in the summertime, because winter was so bad. Yampa or any of the towns just had summer school.

"I miss the horses, you know, you get so attached to your horses, they were just like members of the family. For work horses we had old Ben and Jess, that was my father's favorite work team, and then we had all his driving horses. I talked to my horses, you know, ride along on horseback and just talk to my horse, so I missed them when we got to California. I never really got to ride horses after that. When I went to school we just tied them up to a fence back of the school. They stood there all day, then at noon we would take them a little water and feed them, then at 4 o'clock we got on our horses and rode home.

"I found myself just riding my horse so I could talk to him. We had a lot of nice long rides together. My mother was raised up in Toponas and she rode horseback and lived like a western woman. I had six brothers and sisters and I was four years older than my next brother. In the meantime before we left for Chicago, my father and mother were converted in a cowboy revival at Yampa. Maybe you have heard of Jim Norvell. He was an Evangelist and so then my father decided he wanted to go to Moody Bible School, so we went to Chicago. I was three years old at the time and we stayed there two and a half years. We came back and I started back to my little log school house. I've been lucky all my life. I've associated with very nice people all my life. My father and mother were very religious.

"My parents were very strict. They were in this cowboy revival. They helped start the church in Yampa, the Congregational Church, in 1902. My mother and father were always active in Christian work. I was not allowed to dance, play cards, and we always went to church and Sunday school, so we were brought up with high moral standards.

"In Oak Creek they had mines there but the ranchers used to take their wagons and go down and get a load of coal. They didn't ship coal out; that's one reason they brought in the railroad, that was to open up those mines over in this part of the country. Did I tell you about how we happened to leave there?...Well, when they had to buy the right-of-way they came to our house and said they surveyed the right-of-way between the house and the barn. My father argued with them; I can remember the people coming up and talking with them, so he finally told them, 'If you're going to ruin my ranch, I'll sell it to you.' So the railroad company bought the ranch. First we moved to Mesa County for a couple of years, then we moved to California so my father and mother and my brother and sisters grew up thinking they were Californians. I had never forgotten Colorado and my grandparents lived in Steamboat. I used to come back and visit them. So the last few years when I finally decided to permanently retire I came back.

"My family were all active in the church and followed in my parents' footsteps. My first sister was a gospel singer, and the other boys were ministers except the brother next to me. He was a farmer in California and he drove the school bus. He was sometimes active in church, but he wasn't a minister, but the other two brothers were. My little brother died soon after we went to California of diptheria, and the rest of them all lived to be grown. Now the only ones that are left are two brothers and me. I'm the oldest one and

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here I am just going strong. California was just a different place. I know when I first started high school in California, it was a new high school, one of the finest schools in California. My mother went with me to register. I was in the office and the woman was taking my name and so forth and about that time school was dismissed, and you could hear the people out in the halls. It was just a terrible noise. I was just a little country girl and I burst into tears. Didn't take me long to live that down and I got used to it and liked it, but it was a change, a big change. I was only 13 years old.

"Our first car was a Ford, I remember it was a Ford sedan, it was after we already moved to California. I was out of school, I think I was taking a post graduate course. It was funny, my father used to try to drive an automobile kind of like you drive a horse. My moher never did learn to drive, he showed her how to start it and she got in and went around and around in the barn yard and she forgot how to stop, so after she finally got it stopped she never tried to drive again. When I learned to drive I could drive to school and that was in California. That was a great event when we got an automobile, but I had seen them before, but they weren't as common as they are now. That was something new, a sign of luxury to drive an automobile."

I asked Hazel what she did after she got out of high school. "My grandpa was Preston King, he's an old time pioneer here in Steamboat. He was a civil engineer and he surveyed a lot of border lines, for ranching, for homestead, and some of the roads and ditches. He and my grandmother lived here in Steamboat for a long time. I used to come up when I was a little girl and stay with them. He got me my first job.

"My first job was here in Steamboat Springs in 1918, and my grandfather lived here and he knew Ray Peck, the supervisor for the Forest Service. I had just taken a Civil Service examination in California, so my grandfather got me that job. I worked here one summer, then was transferred to the District Forester's office in Denver, and then transferred to Laramie. I think I worked there for two years, and then I was transferred to Encampment, Wyoming. That's where I met my husband, so we were married in 1921.

"He was in the Navy in World War I, and Tom had to get his father's permission when he was 16. He wanted to go into the service, so he had to have his father's written permission, so he could join. He was a fireman in the engine room. I met him in Encampment, Wyoming. I was working for the forest service as a typist-stenographer. I was transferred from Laramie to Encampment. He had come west for his health and had a homestead there, so that where I met him. He became a disabled veteran when he had the flu, you know, when so many people had that flu after WWI. He was down in Florida, and a whole bunch of the sailors were sick and they were supposed to be transferred to a hospital. They were taken there all on stretchers and laid out on the dock, and it rained in their faces and they all caught pneumonia and he got tuberculosis, so he homesteaded in Encampment for health reasons.

"Tom was always talking about Missouri and they called him the Missourian all the time. He had a homestead and he was pretty much of a joker. On Saturday night they always had a dance. I stayed with the postmistress and she told me that there was a boy who wanted to meet me and so we went to the dance. I was new in town and so I was sitting there thinking I'll be a wallflower tonight when I looked down and there was a pair of feet. I looked up and there was a great tall man. I thought he seemed so tall; he was six feet two.

"He asked me to dance. I thought, well...he must be one of the local boys. I didn't want to make him mad, so I...he hadn't been introduced or anything, so I danced with him and one thing.... There was a box supper and I had a box and he kept asking me what my box was like. I wouldn't tell him, so he kept buying boxes and finally he had a whole bunch of women with children and they set up a table out in the center of the hall. He had a picnic and somebody else bought my box. So I didn't get to eat with him. He saw me home that night and he was there every night from then till June. We were married the

eighth of June in 1921 in Encampment, Wyoming. Our minister was a young fellow from a Theological Seminary in Chicago. He was just sent out there. He was called a home missionary. He was the one who performed the ceremony. Another thing, it was a surprise. We wanted it to be a surprise to the people in town, and they wanted to surprise us, so they took up a collection and bought us a nice set of silver. One fellow sang,'Oh Promise Me' and that was our signal and we got up and stood between the doorway and the front living room and he started performing the ceremony and everybody said, is it real, are they really getting married? So it was a surprise all around, we were surprised about the silver and they were surprised that we were getting married. It was in the house of the postmistress. She had to come to the mountains for her health, and she was the only one who could pass the examination to be postmistress.

"I roomed and boarded with the postmistress. Her name was Minnie C. Corum and every evening after I met Tom he came up to her house and every Saturday night there was a dance at the City Hall. There was a picture show and a dance every Saturday night and that was the main entertainment. I know one time we went on a sleigh ride to Saratoga, just visiting with the neighbors and taking trips. We went horseback riding and later on when spring came we went fishing just to be outdooors. That was our entertainment and just seeing each other."

Soon after they were married Tom and Hazel moved to Denver where Tom started law school. Their son, Thomas H. Henson Jr., was born there on March 16, 1922. In 1924 they moved to Poplar Bluff, Missouri and lived there for twenty years. During this time they had a daughter named Idamaye also known as Hidie.

"During the Depression my husband was an attorney for the Central States Light and Power Company, so he traveled a lot. So we didn't suffer in the Depression, but some of our neighbors around us did. A lot of men were out of jobs, there was no money, it was really a hardship on a great many people. I remember I always kept a jigsaw puzzle on the card table in the living room, so we could have some entertainment. We didn't go out places as much as we did before. We had to cut down on some things, but it wasn't terribly hard for my family, nor for my father's family, I guess. Money was just scarce and people had to deny themselves a lot of things they had before."

Thinking back, Hazel remembers at what moment she heard of Pearl Harbor being attacked: "I was working in St. Louis at the time at a small arms plant. The war was in Europe, so I heard it on the way to work. It shocked me because my son was the right age to go in. He went in a couple of years after that into the Air

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Corps reserve. He didn't go in until 1943.

"He was in the air corps. He wanted to go to college and at that time I had moved to California and he had registered at the University of Berkeley, and he was able to finish a half year, then he got the call and he was in this country about nine months before they sent him overseas. He had his 21st birthday on his way overseas. That was March 16, 1943. He was stationed at New Guinea and he was on a boat because he was being transferred to the Philippine Islands. The kamikaze plane hit their ship, and he was one of casualties. I didn't hear it till the day after Christmas, when we got the telegram.

"I think the happiest time of my life was when the children were little. I had a boy and girl. The boy was four years older than the girl. We were happily married. There have been two things that have floored me. One was when my marriage broke up and then when I lost my son, that was two tragedies. After that I went to work for the Veterans Administration and worked in San Francisco, Denver and Washington. These were transfers for the Civil Service. Before working for the Veterans Administration I worked for the Civil Service.

"I had a long career in the Veterans Administration. I think I first started in San Francisco, then our office was moved to Denver, then I asked for a transfer to Washington, D.C. I worked there for five years. Then I was transferred back to San Francisco and finished my career there."

Hazel concluded her story by talking about all the changes she had seen in her life. "I can remember the first automobile I ever saw. I can remember the ranches putting in the telephone

lines. In Phippsburg, for instance, the ranches dug the holes for the poles and everything. We had a party line and every time the phone rang all the people answered it. I can remember when radio came in and the T.V. Well, if you told people you could see people way far off on the screen it sounded impossible. In the early days Steamboat was just a cow town, they say that they drove herds of cattle right through the main street. It wasn't nearly as large as it is now.

"I really have enjoyed retirement. They call it the golden years. Some people feel so sorry for older people, they are so lonely and feel sorry for themselves. I've just enjoyed my retirement. When I was working I wanted to write a book someday, well, when I retired I wrote two books. I used to tape my father or write down his words in shorthand. I've had two trips since I retired, one trip was to the Holy Lands and then my daughter and I took a trip to Europe and visited 11 countries. I had been to Alaska twice, my youngest brother was a missionary there. He lived in Fairbanks. I've been here in this building for 12 years now. I came when it was first built (reunited with old friends and one cousin). The only people I know now are senior citizens. I'm happy as can be."

Hazel's book on her father is entitled **Something Of His Own.**

"My father told me all about his life and I thought it would make a good book. It was a Western story."

Hazel liked writing the first book so much she wrote another about her mother entitled **Mother Remembers** and is mostly in her mother's words, recorded on tape before the book about her father was written. I haven't read these books yet. Hazel has had such an interesting life and has seen and experienced so many changes, I can just imagine the western life her parents experienced. I'm going to read those books one of these days.

"I was born on the homestead my father called Poverty Gulch"

Out Where the West Begins
Out where the smile dwells a little longer. . . . .
Out where the hand-clasp's a little stronger
Out where the sun is a little brighter,
Where the snows that fall are a little whiter,
Where the bonds of home are a wee bit tighter,
That's where the West begins.

Excerpt from Arthur Chapman